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Captive CIA Agent's Death Galvanized Hostage Search

Buckley's Plight Became Agency Crusade

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For the Reagan administration and especially the Central Intelligence Agency, Iran and the Moslem extremists it supports in the Middle East took on urgent new significance on March 16, 1984, when a man named William Buckley—described at the time as a political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon—was snatched off the streets of Beirut by a group calling itself Islamic Jihad.

As his captors have since charged, Buckley was the chief of the CIA's Beirut station, U.S. sources have confirmed. He was one of the CIA's leading experts on terrorism, and his kidnaping initiated what one CIA official called the agency's "private hostage crisis." At agency headquarters in Langley, Buckley's colleagues watched helplessly as their expert on terrorism became a victim of terrorism, which the CIA believed led from Beirut to the revolutionary government in Tehran.

For at least a year, the CIA undertook extraordinary measures, spending what one source called a "small fortune" on informants, intercepting communications and enhancing satellite photographs in hopes of determining where Buckley and other U.S. hostages might be held.

The effort failed. After torture and a long period of medical neglect, Buckley died in Beirut, apparently in June 1985. His captors first declared him dead later in 1985. In a statement released in Beirut earlier this month, they reiterated that Buckley had been "executed" after having "confessed" to working for the CIA.

The Islamic Jihad statement said the group had "volumes written with [Buckley's] own hand and recorded on videotapes." President Reagan indirectly confirmed that Buckley is dead in his news conference last week, when he spoke of

five American hostages in Lebanon; Buckley would be the sixth.

According to knowledgeable sources, Buckley's death redoubled administration interest in his fellow hostages. A personal order from Reagan led to intensified efforts to find and free them, the sources said.

None of the remaining American hostages has any connections—direct or indirect—to the CIA or any other intelligence agency, according to authoritative U.S. government sources and colleagues of the hostages. Also, well-placed sources say those hostages have received better treatment from their captors, including competent medical care, since Buckley's death.

Before Buckley died, the search for him became a crusade for the CIA and a preoccupation of William J. Casey, its director. Agency officials never felt confident that a rescue attempt would succeed. The agency did obtain "irrefutable" evidence that Buckley had been tortured and, after initially resisting, finally broke down and disclosed information about CIA operations, the source said. Some senior CIA officials wept when they heard details of the torture, which was prolonged and painful, the source said.

For Deputy CIA Director Clair E. George, who oversees all CIA covert operations abroad, the kidnaping was personally anguishing. George had been station chief in Beirut in 1975-76, when two U.S. government officials were abducted and held hostage for four months before being released. Then George went to Athens to take the place of assassinated station chief Richard S. Welch.

"This [the Buckley kidnaping] was like all of Clair's bad dreams revisited," said one source. "He just about turned the building [CIA headquarters], and our capabilities, and the limits of our imagination on end to get [Buckley] back."

Buckley was assigned to Lebanon in mid-1983 to help the Lebanese develop methods for thwarting terrorism and to rebuild the U.S. intelligence presence after the bombing of the U.S. Embassy a few months earlier, the sources said.



WILLIAM BUCKLEY
... was CIA station chief in Beirut

Seventeen Americans died in the attack, including Robert C. Ames, the CIA's chief Middle East analyst, and several other CIA officers.

On March 16, 1984, Buckley was seized on a Beirut street and spirited away—the first of what would become a string of kidnappings of Americans.

Buckley has been the least known among the group of Americans held by Moslem extremists in Lebanon. He had no wife or close family to speak for him. One source said Buckley was picked for the dangerous assignment because he did not have a family. Previously, one source said, Buckley was in Cairo, where he had helped train bodyguards for Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, later assassinated.

Terrorists might have suspected Buckley's true identity and targeted him for kidnaping, the sources said.

Buckley often carried a walkie-talkie in Beirut and went nearly every day to the headquarters building of the Lebanese intelligence service—and could have been followed, the sources said.

For more than a year, CIA officials, including Casey, held out hope that Buckley was alive, deciding that reports on his whereabouts and condition were contradictory and did not support a definitive conclusion that Buckley had been killed.

At one point, the CIA received help from an FBI team trained in locating kidnap victims. The team went to Beirut but failed to locate Buckley after a month of careful and sophisticated detective work, according to a senior Reagan administration official. Officials now think that Buckley was in Lebanon during the entire period of his captivity, most of the time in Beirut.

At the time of Buckley's capture, the State Department released a brief biography, which said he was from Medford, Mass., and was a graduate of Boston University. It said he had worked as a librarian and as a civilian employe of the Army until joining the State Department shortly before he was assigned to Beirut.

Candace Hammond of Farmer, N.C., who said she had been a close friend of Buckley for 10 years, said in an interview that he told her before he left for Beirut that "he wasn't real thrilled with the assignment."

She said Buckley had called her from Beirut shortly before he was kidnaped. "He said there was a lot of bombing, that it was a madhouse. There was shattered glass in his apartment. And he hoped he would be coming home sooner than expected because it was such a stressful situation."

She said she received a letter from Buckley the day after he was kidnaped, thanking her for a box of valentine gifts she had sent him. "That just about broke my heart," she said.
